DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 045 EA 029 908

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TITLE	Governing America's Schools: A Primer for Reporters.
INSTITUTION	Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO.
PUB DATE	1999-06-00
NOTE	17p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Education Commission of the States, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427; Tel: 303-299-3600; e-mail: ecs@ecs.org; Web site: http://www.esc.org
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrative Organization; *Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; *Governance; *Journalism; News Media; Public Schools; School Policy
IDENTIFIERS	National Commission on Governing Americas Schools

ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed to help journalists better understand and explain to their audiences the complex issues surrounding school governance. It examines the nature of school governance and discusses the National Commission on Governing America's Schools, an investigative committee that was formed to take a close, critical, all-encompassing look at how schools are organized and managed. The text discusses the ways in which schools have historically been governed, describes the myriad methods of governance accompanying school growth in America, and relates that there is no evidence of a national consensus regarding the best institutional framework in which public schooling operates. It details what states and districts are currently doing and provides a list of school districts, most of them urban, that are undergoing a shift in governance. The volume explains how school governance relates to other education stories, such as vouchers and curriculum reform, and how governance affects every district and every aspect of education. It provides examples of interesting storylines and explores the public's attitude toward governance. Suggestions for defining the different governance models, such as charter schools, deregulation, and the traditional approach, are presented, followed by a list of resources for further information. (RJM)

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ED 432 045

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

ECS

Governing America's Schools

A Primer for Reporters

What's Inside:

- Defining school governance
- Governance models now being used
- New models
- Public attitudes
- Interesting storylines
- Additional resources

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Governing America's Schools:

A Primer for Reporters

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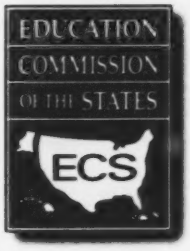
June 1999



Acknowledgments

This publication was written and contributed to by The Hauser Group and by the following ECS staff members: Arleen Arnsparger, Christie McElhinney and Todd Ziebarth.

The publication was designed by Square One Creative and Anna West, ECS production coordinator; proofed by Josie Canales.

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Governing America's Schools

Introduction

Chronic low performance in too many of the nation's public schools continues to vex policymakers, frustrate teachers, anger parents, and hurt students. One major barrier may be the education system itself.

More and more leaders, policymakers and educators alike believe a more flexible and accountable education system that welcomes diverse approaches to both schooling and school governance can help improve student achievement. To that end, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) created the National Commission on Governing America's Schools. At the urging of policymakers from across the country, the commission is studying a variety of options for K-12 governance, looking for ways that states and communities can effectively organize to provide students with an excellent education.

The commission will culminate its work in November 1999 with recommendations of workable options for educators, policymakers and the public to consider — options that could redefine what we mean by a public education system.

What does this mean for journalists? Just as education professionals realize that you can no longer look at schools in a vacuum, reporters are realizing that the pieces — charter schools, low standardized test scores, teacher quality, etc. — are connected. And while the pieces are important, making the connections gives your readers a broader view of the education system, and thereby, a better understanding of their own schools and how they can help schools better serve the children in their own communities.

As reporters across the country start to look at who is running their local school systems, many also are taking a look at who should be running them. This primer is designed to help reporters ask well-informed questions and offers journalists a framework for understanding the complex issues surrounding school governance.

Topics included:

- What is Governance?
- What is the National Commission on Governing America's Schools and What is it Doing?
- How Have Schools Historically Been Governed?
- What Governance Models Are States and Districts Currently Using?
- How Does Governance Relate to Other Education Stories?
- What Are Interesting Storylines?
- What is the Public's Attitude Toward Governance?
- How Do You Define the Different Governance Models?
- Where Can I Go for Additional Information?
- Who Are the Experts?

Governing America's Schools

What is Governance?

For the last 15 years, we have examined education from almost every angle, but this one question is at the heart of the governance debate —

Could we significantly improve schools if we change the way they are organized?

Simply put, school governance refers to the institutions and individuals who make decisions about a state or school district's education policies. During most of this century, school management has followed a centralized model typical of bureaucratic organizations.

However, mounting frustration over the low performance of our schools has spawned a variety of new, and sometimes, radical, proposals to change traditional governance models. Whether it's charter schools; city, state or corporate takeovers; home schooling; or vouchers, there is much activity around the "edges" of education governance.

For example, in Chicago, the state legislature gave the mayor control of public schools. In Baltimore, the state partnered with the city to run its schools. In Detroit, a new law stripped the elected board of its authority, and turned the system over to the mayor and a newly appointed board.

As more and more cities rethink the way their schools are governed, there is, as yet, little evidence or consensus about what changes, if any produce the best results.

Governing America's Schools

What is the National Commission on Governing America's Schools and What is it Doing?

Many leaders, policymakers and educators alike believe that a more flexible and accountable education system can help improve student achievement. But changing a massive, bureaucratic institution is no small task.

That's why the Education Commission of the States (ECS) created the National Commission on Governing America's Schools. This commission was formed to take a close, critical, all encompassing look at how schools are organized and managed. Co-chaired by Kentucky Governor Paul E. Patton, 1998-99 ECS chairman, and James Renier, former Honeywell CEO and chairman and current chairman of the Institute for Educational Leadership, this diverse (please see list that follows), experienced and outspoken group is asking tough questions and will be laying out school governance options for policymakers to consider.

The commission is considering an array of governance options — ranging from making improvements to the existing system to creating innovative alternatives. Here are the options:

- **Traditional System:** This option focuses on improving the quality and efficiency of existing district-run school systems.
- **Site-Managed Schools:** This option retains a district wide board and executive structure, but recreates the central office as a provider of services to schools and promotes distinctive and neighborhood-controlled schools.
- **Charter Districts:** This option makes a clear distinction between the management and operation of schools by creating a system of independently operated, publicly accountable schools.
- **Community Education Agency:** This body is a planning agency that coordinates education services provided by contractors and private organizations, as well as those provided directly by school districts. This approach is widely used in postsecondary education.

The commission will complete its work in November 1999 with the release of workable options for educators, policymakers and the public to consider — options that could dramatically alter the management of schools.

Commission members include:

- *Anthony J. Alvarado,* deputy superintendent, San Diego
- *Lynnwood Battle,* Cincinnati school board member and former executive at Procter & Gamble
- *Thomas Davis,* Missouri State Board of Education member
- *Howard Fuller,* professor, Marquette University and former Milwaukee superintendent
- *Frank Keating,* governor, Oklahoma
- *Diana Lam,* former San Antonio superintendent
- *Donald McAdams,* Houston school board member
- *Deborah McGriff,* senior vice president, Edison Project and former Detroit superintendent
- *Luther S. Olsen,* Wisconsin assemblyman and local school board member
- *David Osborne,* co-author of *Reinventing Government* and managing partner of the Public Strategies Group
- *Neal Peirce,* syndicated columnist
- *Ted Sanders,* president, Southern Illinois University
- *Lisbeth B. Schorr,* director, Harvard University Project on Effective Interventions and author, *Common Purpose*
- *Theodore R. Sizer,* chairman, Coalition of Essential Schools and co-principal, Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School (Devins, Massachusetts)
- *Sheree Speakman,* president and CEO, Fox River Learning
- *Adam Urbanski,* president, Rochester Federation of Teachers

Governing America's Schools

How Have Schools Historically Been Governed?

The debate over the way our public schools should be governed is not new to the American landscape. Changes in school governance ideology and practice have mirrored the changes in America's socio-economic patterns.

Throughout most of the 19th century, control of public schools was anchored in local communities and formal governmental authority was minimal. However, federal and state governments actively endorsed and created incentives for the development of public education. Yet, government provided only the legal foundation. The local communities, specifically ministers and teachers, were charged with formulating the substance of public education.

At that time, state and federal education departments were small and had very few means of enforcing any regulations. Local control in our mostly rural nation was the only option.

By the turn of the 20th century, educators in a rapidly industrializing America were beginning to look towards business as a model of efficiency. In return, corporate America was looking to the schools to produce the kinds of workers and citizens the new industrial order required.

With that in mind, reformers began to see local lay governance of schools as chaotic, intrusive and often corrupt. Furthermore, they thought the curriculum of the 19th century to be poorly adapted to the variety of pupils now flooding the nation's classrooms. Educators and their new corporate partners believed that the nation was now ready for a more uniform curriculum in order to plan the course of the impending economic and social evolution.

Another ideological transformation occurred when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka decision in 1954. That decision served to mobilize new social movements that laid the groundwork for an education reform agenda whose goal was massive institutional change. The ruling shifted education policy in the direction of providing children with the education that was "rightfully" due them for the betterment of society.

As more and more programs were created to address a number of problems, education governance became more haphazard. Critics of the existing education system argued that the present institutional arrangements were becoming obstacles to change. Groups of "outsiders," those who had been previously denied power, sought their fair share of influence. Congress, federal bureaucracies, the courts and newly formed education interest groups were just some of the forces redefining the education policy agenda and once again reshaping the governance landscape.

As recently as the mid-1980s, another shift was occurring as concerns grew that American students were falling behind their international competitors. Battle cries that the United States was at risk of losing its status as an industrial leader were driving a noticeable shift in the public's perception of the social purposes of education. The dominant rhetoric of schooling today is about economic growth, productivity and efficiency. With that in mind, it is not surprising that an overarching theme in education policy is that of privatization and the creation of market mechanisms to regulate education practice in lieu of state control and regulation.

Currently there is no evidence of a national consensus regarding the best institutional framework in which public schooling operates. That lack of consensus raises the following questions:

- What interests should education serve?
- What is "public" in public education other than its funding?
- If education does not serve a community of interest beyond the economic interests of the individual, is the common good defined as the aggregation of individual interests?

What Are States and Districts Currently Doing?

Changes in school governance systems are taking place as we speak. These changes are dramatic, affecting millions of American public school students. The following is a list of primarily urban school districts that have undergone shifts in governance. Also included in these capsules are the reasons for the change.

San Francisco, California — The San Francisco school district began reconstituting schools in 1983, as part of a court order to improve the academic performance of minorities and to desegregate its school system. Reconstitution allows the district to replace the principals, teachers and other staff, and create new philosophies and curricula at several schools. In 1983-84, six schools were completely reconstituted. Later, more were reconstituted along less radical lines, including 10 reconstituted schools since 1994.

Denver, Colorado — Denver Public Schools (DPS) officials implemented a school evaluation process that will consider student achievement levels, writing samples, suspensions, participation in the gifted and talented program, parent involvement, building maintenance and allocation of resources. A school deemed in need of "redesign" could be placed on probation for a year and given a chance to reform itself, or if the situation is bad enough, be closed over the summer and re-staffed for the following fall. In its first drastic step, DPS reconstituted two elementary schools, rehiring only a few original teachers. Although the teachers' union initially balked when news of the possible overhauls broke, union leaders then took the unusual step of cooperating closely with DPS administrators. Still, all but a handful of teachers at each school were required to find positions elsewhere in the district.

District of Columbia — In 1995, the U. S. Congress created a financial control board to operate the District of Columbia's government. This board appointed a new superintendent of schools and created a board of trustees to oversee the city's school system.

Chicago, Illinois — In 1995, the state legislature shifted control of the Chicago Public Schools to the mayor and charged him with appointing school board members, the board president and the district's chief executive officer. The Chicago Public Schools chief executive officer ordered the reconstitution of seven poorly performing high schools in the 1997-98 school year. Reconstitution in Chicago requires all employees — principals, teachers, and classified staff — to reapply for their jobs. Those who receive a poor evaluation will be removed from the schools. Teachers not rehired have 10 months to find another job in the system before being taken off the payroll. They are expected to work as substitutes during that time, with one day off a week for job hunting.

Baltimore, Maryland — In 1997, the state legislature entered into a partnership with the city of Baltimore to reform its public schools. From this partnership, a new, nine-member board of school commissioners was created, with members jointly appointed by the governor and the mayor.

Boston, Massachusetts — In 1991, the state legislature enacted a law that abolished the elected Boston School Committee and gave the mayor of Boston the right to appoint school committee members. In 1996, the citizens of Boston voted to maintain the mayorally appointed school committee.

Detroit, Michigan — In 1999, the state legislature enacted a law that reduces the power of the locally elected Detroit board and eventually abolishes it. The elected board is now an advisory body in the district and will no longer exist once each elected member's term expires. The law also charged the mayor of Detroit with appointing a reform board, who will then select a chief executive officer for the Detroit public schools. The CEO will have unprecedented decisionmaking power, with the reform board playing a much more limited role than that of a traditional school board.

Minneapolis, Minnesota — From 1993 until 1997, a private company, Public Strategies Group (PSG) of St. Paul, provided superintendent services to the Minneapolis school district. The firm was paid on the basis of its performance. In 1997, though, the district and PSG announced an end to the contract arrangement after a turbulent few months of public criticism and disappointing test scores.

New York City, New York — State officials told the New York City school district to improve certain schools or risk state takeover. In response, the district assigned these schools to a separate school district directly under the district chancellor's control. Although students were not transferred, the chancellor ordered the redesign of 13 of the district's worst schools, with eight getting new principals.

Cleveland, Ohio — In 1995, a U.S. federal court charged the state with running the Cleveland public schools through a state-appointed superintendent. Just three weeks before the start of school, the state-appointed superintendent announced he was "cleaning house" at two elementary schools. Despite protests from parents and the teachers' union, more than two-thirds of the teachers at the schools were replaced when classes resumed in August 1995. In 1997, the state legislature shifted control of the Cleveland public schools to the mayor and charged him with appointing the school board and the chief executive officer of the school system.

In 1995, Ohio policymakers also created a pilot scholarship/voucher program in Cleveland. In the program's first year, parents of 2,000 K-3 Cleveland students were eligible for vouchers of up to $2,500 for tuition at a private, public or religious school of their choice. In 1997, the program was expanded to 3,000 K-4 students and, in 1998, to 4,000 K-4 students. Once a student enrolls in the program, he or she may remain in it through the 8th grade.

In May 1999, the Ohio Supreme Court ruled that the Cleveland program was unconstitutional, but only on a technical issue. According to the court, the program was paid for improperly through the state budget rather than a separate authorization. The court stated the program did not breach the separation of church and state in either Ohio or federal law. As a result, legislation to restore the program within the legal boundaries of the court's ruling will likely be introduced in the Ohio legislature this session.

Houston, Texas — In 1993, the Houston Independent School District reconstituted Rusk Elementary School, and reassigned the school's principal, declared all the teaching positions vacant and told the teachers they would have to reapply for their jobs or transfer elsewhere in the district.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin — Wisconsin policymakers approved the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program in 1990 and last amended it in 1995. The program allows qualifying students to attend any private or parochial school in Milwaukee, however, no more than 15% of the school district's enrollment may attend private schools in any school year, and no more than 49% of a private school's enrollment may consist of students receiving vouchers. As of fall 1998, approximately 6,000 Milwaukee students were attending private schools through the program.

In January 1999, the Milwaukee Public Schools Administration and the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association enacted an agreement that: (1) allows schools participating in the program to hire their own staff without regard to seniority; and (2) removes a cap that limited the number of African-American teachers that could be hired at schools.

Governing America's Schools

How Does Governance Relate to Other Education Stories?

"Surprising School Reform" — ***U.S. News and World Report***

"Voucher Veto" — ***The Nation***

"Selling Teachers on School Reform" — ***Los Angeles Times***

"Plan to Improve Worst Schools Interests Mayor" — ***New York Times***

"Cities Choosing Charter Schools" — ***Miami Herald***

"Private Tuition Deal Ok'd" — ***Chicago Sun Times***

"Candidates Agree: Mayor's Control of School Board Should Increase" — ***Philadelphia Inquirer***

On any given day, the headlines are filled with governance-related stories — they're just often not thought of that way. But the reality is that many of the issues dominating the education agenda are directly related to how schools are run.

For example, many stories highlight the plight of low-performing schools. And it is precisely this concern that has pushed through a host of somewhat radical changes in how schools are managed. This is particularly true in urban areas, as evidenced by the preceding examples.

The changes cited in the states and communities described are changes in governance that are a direct result of low performance in schools. Therefore, a discussion on how schools are run can only enhance stories addressing a local school's performance.

Comprehensive school reform through school models such as Success For All or the Edison Project is also getting a great deal of attention. Yet, articles rarely touch on how decisionmaking must change to support a new education model.

Charter schools and vouchers do more than reject existing public schools, they reject the body that controls them. In essence, parents have said, "You've had your chance to make decisions for my child, now I'm going to."

The very nature of school governance makes it a critical element to almost any education story. And as parents and community members struggle to understand what is happening in their neighborhood schools and who's making decisions that impact our youth, information about governance is essential.

The fact is that governance issues impact every district and every aspect of education. And, because education is at the top of everyone's agenda, education journalists have a stake in investigating how school management practices affect their communities and how local activities fit into a broader national perspective.

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What Are Interesting Storylines?

The potential for covering governance issues is quite extensive. Here are a few ideas to help get you started:

- School vouchers have become hot political and legal topics — use a debate on school vouchers to explore the deeper issue of school governance.
- In a district where there are charter schools, take a look at the reasons why parents and educators are turning to other governance methods.
- Trace the governance history of your particular school district.
- Take an informal survey of parents and/or teachers — does either group know who is running the school system?
- Talk to students about how they would like their schools governed — the answer might be quite different from the current system.
- Profile individuals in power on their education philosophies and their perspectives on changes in governance.
- Compare and contrast governance styles in districts with similar demographics — is there a system that works better?
- Use school board decisions and elections as opportunities to explore governance structures.

Governing America's Schools

What is the Public's Attitude Toward Governance?

Key findings from recent education polls include:

- Far from having given up on the nation's public schools, Americans continue to value and have confidence in them. And the more firsthand knowledge people have about the public schools, the more favorable their perceptions.
- Public opinion is split on questions of whether the nation's schools are as good as they used to be. Still, many people — particularly employers and college-level educators — think public schools are not as good as they can and should be.
- There is widespread concern, in particular, about the quality and performance of the nation's urban schools.
- Many Americans view public school funding as neither adequate nor equitable, but there is little agreement about the best way to finance schools.
- Americans favor reforming public school systems rather than dismantling and replacing them.
- Americans still trust teachers, principals and school board members to make decisions about how to manage schools, but the public's trust is wavering.

(Source: PKD/Gallup Poll)

How Do You Define the Different Governance Models?

- **The Traditional Approach**
  The centralized model typical of a bureaucratic organization has been the predominant mode of public education governance for most of the 1900s. This model serves to cope with a large and diverse clientele. The education bureaucracy tends to standardize delivery and resource allocation.

- **Deregulation**
  Many states and districts have removed regulations and mandates that dictate who makes what decisions. These changes have allowed schools to make decisions in areas previously controlled exclusively by the district and/or states.

- **School-Based Management**
  Initiatives to substantially shift decisionmaking responsibilities away from state and district school boards, superintendents and central administrative offices to schools are generically called school-based management. The belief is that school and student performance will improve by making those closest to the delivery of services — principals, teachers and parents — more independent and more responsible for results.

- **Open Enrollment**
  Open enrollment policies free parents from traditional residency requirements in student placement decisions, and allow them to select a school suited to their children's particular interests, abilities and learning needs. An objective of this method of governance is to bring about improvements in the public schools by forcing them to compete for students.

- **Charter Schools**
  Charter schools are semi-autonomous schools founded by teachers, parents, community groups or private organizations that operate under a written contract or charter spelling out how the school will be organized and managed, what students will be taught and expected to achieve, and how success will be measured.

- **Tax Credits, Tax Deductions and Vouchers**
  A consumer-driven approach that allows the use of public money in private and parochial schools usually through tax credits, tax deductions or vouchers.

- **State and Mayoral Takeovers**
  Since 1989, 23 states have passed legislation that allows them to take over an academically bankrupt district. At least 11 of these states and the federal government have actually taken over a low-performing district. In a state takeover, the state legislature, the state board of education, or a federal court charges the state department of education with managing a local district for a certain amount of time. A few states have intervened in urban school systems by adopting laws that give control of the school district to the mayor.

Where Can I Go for Additional Information?

ECS has a variety of materials related to education governance issues. Included below are a few examples of documents written on the subject. Please see the Information Clearinghouse section on ECS' Web site for additional articles (www.ecs.org).

Only executive summaries are provided on the Web. Call us at 303-299-3692 for a complimentary copy of the reports listed below:

- **Future Trends Affecting Education**
  Examines ongoing and emerging education, demographic, technological, economic, political and social trends and explores how these trends may affect education over the next 20-30 years. 23 pages, SI-99-1. (Also available as a condensed Policy Brief, 5 pages, PB-99-1).

- **Americans' Perceptions About Public Education**
  Reviews and synthesizes findings of major nationwide polls and surveys exploring Americans' attitudes, opinions and perceptions about public education over the past three decades. 22 pages, SI-99-2.

- **The Invisible Hand of Ideology: Perspectives from the History of School Governance**
  Describes education governance reforms over the 150 years and shows how an understanding of this history can illuminate the complexity of today's choices and enrich deliberation about them. 30 pages, SI-99-3.

- **The Changing Landscape of Education Governance**
  Describes recent education governance changes and why they occurred, discusses preliminary consequences and examines next steps (i.e., what issues and questions face states and districts undertaking governance changes). 45 pages, SI-99-4.

- **Recent Changes in Public-Sector Governance**
  Presents an overview of public-sector governance changes, provides real-world examples of such changes, and speculates on future changes and their applicability to public education. 70 pages, SI-99-5.

- **Emerging Strategies for Private-Sector Governance**
  Presents an overview of private-sector governance changes, provides real-world examples of such changes, and speculates on future changes and their applicability to public education. 45 pages, SI-99-6.

- **Effective School Governance Practices: A Look at Today's Practice and Tomorrow's Promise**
  Describes effective practices within traditional governance systems and provides examples of school districts that exemplify these practices. 29 pages, SI-99-7.

- **State Takeovers and Reconstitutions**
  Presents an overview of state takeovers of districts and reconstitution of schools, discusses opposing perspectives, examines effects and offers questions for state policymakers. 13 pages, PB-98-5.

- **State Education Governance Structures**
  Examines state education governance structures in the 50 states, and explores the formal relationships among those holding official positions in state education governance and how such relationships have changed over time. 123 pages, EG-93-1.

Who Are the Experts?

The following is a list of experts you may find useful in governance research:

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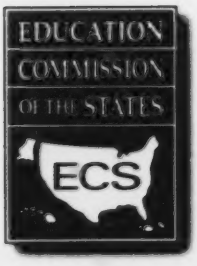

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